Panel 10: Eckerd's First College (1958-1965)

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Eckerd’s First College (1958-1965)

“Hello, what do we need to start a college?” — Dr. William H. Kadel, after agreeing to become Florida Presbyterian College’s founding president, to Emma Conboy, his secretary from the church who joined him in the summer of 1958.

“Paper and pencils would be a good start.” — Conboy’s reply before grabbing a dinner order from the parish hall fund and going to the store to make the college’s first purchase.

“We will have to explain that this complete newness is allowing us to break from rigid traditions of the past—starting our own traditions and making use of the best ideas from the whole world of education.” — Dr. J. Thomas West, founding director.

Florida Presbyterian College—now Eckerd College—became the first institution of higher learning to occupy the former Maritime Base. The fledgling school took possession of most buildings on the peninsula during the summer of 1959. By 1963, classes were held both at the base and in buildings at the permanent campus in southern St. Petersburg.

“We knew from the first year that close quarters, lack of private study areas, and the pressure of commuting would put a speedy end to our high morale.” — Passage from the first FPC yearbook, describing the ‘Year of the Split Campus’ (1962-1963).

After Florida Presbyterian College completed its move to its new campus, the Florida Institute for Continuing University Studies (FICUS)—the continuing education arm of Florida’s public university system—operated a variety of distance education courses from the Bayboro facility. FICUS was disbanded by the legislature in 1965 and its continuing education programs were absorbed by other institutions, including the University of South Florida. The former FICUS library remained on site, however, and became the State University System Extension Library.

Triton Timeline: A Chronology

- October 1956: A Florida Synod of the Presbyterian Church called for the creation of a Presbyterian-affiliated college in Florida.
- May 1958: The Florida Synod created an institution with the name “Florida Presbyterian College” (FPC), a temporary name that would remain in place until a suitable donor would provide financial assistance.
- Summer 1958: The Synod appointed a president and board of trustees, and a site selection committee examined proposed locations for the campus.
- July 1958: St. Petersburg leaders proposed a site in southern Pinellas near the Sunshine Skyway.
- September 15, 1958: St. Petersburg site was selected by the Synod’s site selection committee.
- June 1959: FPC staff started to move into their offices at the temporary campus.
- October 31, 1959: FPC received a sublease from the city for most buildings at the former Maritime Base that lasted through September 30, 1963. This allowed time for the construction of its permanent campus.
- September 1960: Florida Presbyterian College began its first instructional program with 155 freshmen students and 22 faculty in the Merchant Marine buildings along Bayboro Harbor.
- Fall 1960: Groundbreaking ceremony held at future permanent campus site.
- October 4, 1962: City Council offered much of the Bayboro facility to the Florida Institute for Continuing University Studies (FICUS) after FPC completed its move to its permanent campus.
- 1963: Florida Presbyterian College moved to its (Eckerd’s) present waterfront location when the initial phase of construction was completed.
- September 1963: The Board of Control (predecessor to the Board of Regents of the State University System) approved a plan to lease some buildings at the former Maritime Base.
- Fall 1963: FICUS operated at Bayboro as a statewide extension program for Florida’s public universities.
- 1966: The Board of Regents abolished FICUS, opening the door for the University of South Florida to take possession of the Bayboro facility.
- 1970: FPC’s enrollment grew to over 1,100 students taught by 80 faculty.
- 1971: Local drug store businessman Jack Eckerd makes a substantial donation to FPC.
- 1972: FPC is renamed ‘Eckerd College’ in honor of Jack Eckerd’s philanthropy.